DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 401 EC 200 219

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TITLE Educational Aid to Parents of Young Handicapped Children.
PUB DATE Jul 86
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the World Congress of O.M.E.P. the World Organization for Preschool Education (18th, Jerusalem, Israel, July 13-17, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Counseling; *Disabilities; *Educational Needs; Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; Emotional Adjustment; *Family Problems; *Parent Education; *Parent Role

ABSTRACT

The paper examines educational needs of the parents of handicapped children from an international perspective. Noted are common reactions and behaviors of parents including shock, embarrassment, denial of the problem, projection of blame and suspicion, fear and anxiety, and guilt and self-reproach. The impact of the handicapped child on the family is characterized as increasing financial pressure, restricting social activities, requiring role changes, and making continuous demands. A philosophy of education is proposed which stresses the dialogical character of education (an interactional relationship between a mature person and the child) and a linear dynamic movement from childhood to adulthood. Problematic education situations are contrasted by prospectless behavior of students and a circular (rather than linear) dynamic movement. Specific types of educational assistance recommended for parents of disabled children are the following: communication of diagnostic results and accompanying advice to parents; redefining the problem for parents; explaining the child's problem to the parents; and engagement of parents in coordinated educational endeavors. (DB)

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EDUCATIONAL AID TO PARENTS OF YOUNG HANDICAPPED CHILDREN

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(Paper delivered at the XVIII World Congress of O.M.E.P., Jerusalem, Israel, July 13-17, 1986.)

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1. INTRODUCTION

To start off I want to postulate the following: In most instances the presence of a handicapped child brings forth severe educational burdens which may be of such a character that the parents are confronted by the barriers of their own educational potentialities. Such a situation calls for educational aid and guidance by a professionally trained educationist.

According to McDonald (1971: 44) the observation that handicapped children generally make handicapped families is almost a cliché today. Therefore more and more parents are seeking help for their own parental problems while professional workers concerned with the habilitation of handicapped children are increasingly recognizing that attention must not be given to the child alone, but also to its primary educators, namely its parents.

Since the birth of a child is anticipated for several months, the parents during this time usually look forward eagerly to its arrival and have bright dreams of its future. In this connection Kaslow and Cooper (1978: 41) say: "A planned child is desired as the ultimate expression of a couple's love and dreams for the future."

To many parents it seldom occurs that their child will be anything but perfect. Few parents are therefore prepared for having a handicapped child, so it is easy to understand why many report being shocked and confused upon learning of their child's condition, that they experience feelings of disappointment, of embarrassment, of blame and guilt, of suspicion, of an inability and a concern about the child and its future (McDonald, 1971: 45-48; Van Peer and Lutje Spelberg, 1984: 303-304; Kaslow and Cooper, 1978: 41-45).

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These feelings obviously influence the parents' relationships, especially their educational relationship with their child for they are faced with difficult child-rearing conditions. In many instances these feelings originate due to a lack of understanding their own attitudes, of information about the child's problem and the absence of an educationally directed aiding programme (Noland, 1971: x).

2. GENERAL BEHAVIOUR OF PARENTS OF DISABLED CHILDREN

To enable the assistance-giver to render meaningful aid to parents of disabled children, it is necessary for him to be able to assess, recognize and anticipate behaviour unique to these parents and to become more knowledgeable about them - about their hopes, joys, disappointments and frustrations (Seligman, 1979: IX-X).

Mary McCormack (1979: 32) reported that talking to parents of young mentally retarded children she had been struck by their intensity, by a feeling of clinging desperately to hope in the face of odds. They seemed to laugh less than the old hands. People who have lived for ten or twelve years with a handicapped child can talk more easily about his idiosyncrasies and laugh occasionally about the embarrassment and even distress they cause. The difficulties and the behaviour problems have become more accepted as merely part of the child and there to stay (McCormack, 1979: 32; Seligman, 1979: 60-61; Shea and Bauer, 1985: 34-35).

During the early years they are just more glaring signposts to the fact that the child is different and it hurts less to ignore them or explain them away in normal terms, at least to outsiders. It makes some parents difficult and prickly companions at this time and relationships suffer in the tense atmosphere (McCormack, 1979: 32). The first few years are the hardest, not always because of any practical problem - indeed some disabled children will never be as manageable again as when they are small captives in pushchairs. The strains are the emotional ones of coming to terms with the problem and of learning to understand and live with the child.

Not only the way in which parents behave because of the problems of the child, but also the nature of the various problematic educational situations will differ from family to family. It is important to note that the behaviour and feelings of these parents are dependent on their total life situations such as the age of the parents, socio-economical status, religion, marital relations, personalities, the degree of the child's disability, etc. (Janssens, 1977: 32; Shea and Bauer, 1985: 29).

What follows is the more or less general form of negative conduct of parents and which leads to problems in properly educating the disabled child.

2.1 Shock and shattering of future perspectives

As indicated previously few parents are prepared for having a disabled child, therefore some of the first feelings they reveal are those of shock, disillusionment, bewilderment, dismay and disbelief (Broeders, 1981: 7; Ross, 1964: 60-61; Shea and Bauer, 1985; 28-30). About the parents of the brain injured child Cruickshank (1968: 6) reports as follows: "Parents are often stunned when they learn that their child is brain injured. Their initial shock is understandable; their problem is real, and they may rightly be stunned." Like most people in a crisis, parents may temporarily misperceive reality, be able to act, and experience confusion about their own and the child's future.

2.2 Embarrassment

According to McDonald (1971: 46) embarrassment is one of the most common disturbances found with parents of handicapped children. Some reveal feelings of discomfort, distress and disturbance while others feel like going to pieces at the thought of their relatives or friends knowing about them having a disabled child (McCormack, 1979: 34-36).

2.3 Denial of the problem

Many parents deny the existence of the child's disability. These parents usually feel threatened, insecure and confused. They are afraid of being stigmatized and therefore refrain from mentioning their problem to others, or they repress all notions that their child differs from other children (Janssens, 1977: 17-18; Thomas, 1982: 140; Reid, 1971: 57-58; Seligman, 1979: 42-43; Berger, 1981: 293). In the struggle to convince themselves that there is nothing wrong with the child some parents do diagnostic shopping, trying to find a professional who is of the same opinion as they are that there is nothing wrong with the child.

2.4 Projection of blame and suspicion

A common reaction of parents with a handicapped child is to project blame for the situation on to something or somebody else. It may be the doctor who brought the child into the world, it may be some or other traumatic experience. Sometimes one parent becomes suspicious of the other parent, or seeks the fault in his/her relatives. These kinds of reactions usually result from a lack of information about the child's problems and the causes for the situation (Berger, 1981: 293; McDonald, 1971: 48; Seligman, 1979: 41-42).

2.5 Fear and anxiety

Deep concern, matching fear and anxiety about the child's welfare and future is a common parental reaction (Kotzé, 1984: 74), so it is natural for them to ask such questions as: "Will my child ever be able to cope with life? What will happen to him when we are not there anymore? If not properly directed, parents' concerns sometimes result in oversolicitousness and overprotection, which may rob the child of his opportunities for developing independence (McDonald, 1971: 46).

2.6 Guilt and self-reproach

Parents often report that they feel they are to blame for what has happened to their child. Some feel that perhaps they should have done something differently or that the handicapping condition is in retribution for a misdeed (Berger, 1981: 293). One of the major causes of such guilt feelings is the lack of accurate information about the nature of the child's handicapping conditions, its causes and its prospects.

3. THE IMPACT OF THE CHILD'S DISABILITY UPON THE FAMILY

As has been postulated previously the presence of a handicapped child may lead to severe educational and familial burdens, and it may have an important impact on the family life, so much so that it influences the family life cycle in a negative sense (Seligman, 1979: 66-69).

Families with a handicapped child differ only in degree from other families (Harris, 1983: 15). However, the special needs of a disabled child may serve to intensify the strains that exist in every family, disrupting a more or less harmonious functioning of the family as a whole.

In this connection the following can be mentioned:

3.1 Additional financial pressure

Parents may exhaust themselves financially in the trek from one professional office to another seeking diagnostic and treatment help (Harris, 1983: 15). The family may even, at a high financial loss, have to move house, change occupation in order to be nearer to medical and therapeutic facilities.

3.2 Restriction of social activities

Many writers report a drastic restriction of social activities of families of disabled children. The more or less uncontrollable behaviour of certain disabled children forces the parents to avoid visiting friends and relatives or to leave the handicapped child at home. Feelings of shame, embarrassment, inferiority and guilt, the experiencing of being stared at, to experience as being different, further contribute to a less free social contact (McCormack, 1979: 34-35).

3.3 Role-change

In many instances the father, mother and other children are burdened with tasks and responsibilities outside the normal functioning of the family. This can lead to fatigue, tension, jealousy, neglect, quarrels, antagonism and other disharmonic relations within the family.

3.4 Continuous demands

Featherstone (1980: 19) summarized the normal progression when she wrote: "(O)rdinary parenting follows a natural cycle that respects our mortality. When parents are young and healthy and energetic, children require vast amounts of exhausting physical care. As both grow older, this demand tapers off, and eventually the children grow independent." The prolonged dependency of many handicapped children sharply alters the mother's role because she must provide basic physical care and supervision for the child for many years (perhaps her entire life) (Harris, 1983: 16).

Obviously what has been mentioned concerning the feelings and behaviour of parents of disabled children, influence their relationship, especially their educational relationship with their child. Many situations are of such a nature that parents are at a total loss about their child's upbringing and therefore inter alia in need of the aid of a professional educationist.

Next I shall focus briefly on the educational phenomenon itself, the problematic educational situation in general and there after on the educational assistance that may be rendered to parents of disabled children.

4. THE EDUCATIONAL PHENOMENON

Education is to be understood in the comprehensive sense of the up-bringing and formation of a child and his own participation in becoming himself (Schmidt, 1973: XI). Education starts at birth and continues as an interactional dialogical relationship between a more mature person(s) (father, mother, adult), who cares for and acts on behalf of the child and who cannot escape his role as educator, and a less mature person (infant, child, young person), who attaches himself to the more mature person and inevitably is the educand (the one being educated) (Schmidt, 1973: XV, 45).

4.1 The corner stones of education

The multiplicity of literature on child education as well as various insights and deliberations on the child as an educable being, lead educationists, according to Dreyer (1979), to the conclusion that the following three principles may be regarded as the cornerstones of our whole educational concern with the child, namely:

a) The young ones are led forth with a definite objective in view namely adulthood.
b) The child is guided towards this destiny by adults in an evaluating, normative way.
c) The child himself participates actively towards the realization of this aim.

The above-mentioned corner-stones can be explained briefly as follows:

(i) The education of the child centres round the idea of what the child ought to become, that is, it is determined by an image of adulthood that has to be realized. A clear future perspective, a clear accepted aim in life, a definite future investment is at stake here. The child en route is simultaneously 'pulled' and

'pushed' towards adulthood. He is 'pulled' by the invitation towards self-realization and the independence and responsibility that the adults expect from him. At the same time the child is 'pushed towards adulthood as a result of his inevitable physical maturation and the nature of the school programmes.

(ii) In his guidance towards adulthood, the child is aided by the adults in an evaluating, normative way. The adult-educand relationship is marked by the fact that the adult serves as 'model' for the child. In his aid and guidance the adult spontaneously or deliberately intervenes, rearranges and selects events, sets certain demands and cherishes certain ideals for the educand, creates a sphere of security and safety and in this way 'prepared' the child's world.

(iii) In his education the child takes an active part in his own becoming and especially in respect of the meanings he attaches to himself and to reality. Early in his life the child learns to make choices as a result of a set of norms and values he meets. All along the adult as educator plays a very important role by pointing out to the child the values and meaning attached to persons, objects, etc., he meets in reality. While the child is thus gradually introduced to the existing cultural system and values, a plan, a direction, a frame of reference emerges for the child which he uses increasingly to create his own world.

4.2 **The dialogical character of education** **(Ter Horst, 1973: 68-77)**

Education provides perspective to the extent that the child is enabled as a total person, to conduct a total dialogue with the whole of reality. Education seen as a developing dialogue can be indicated by the following:

a) Since his birth the child as a person is in relation or dialogue with reality and busy constituting a world of meanings.

b) Reality consists of the cosmic and transcendental realities.

c) The child's dialogue has a two-way character, namely from the person to reality and from reality to the person. The person gives meaning to reality but he is also presented with meaning.

d) The child also conducts a dialogue with himself as part of reality.

e) The dialogue always has a multi-intentional character. This means that his dialogue can be conducted by means of different functions (visual, auditive, reflective, etc.), by means of different forms of dialogue (cognitive, conative, affective) and also with different intentions (admiring, worshipping, imagining, serving, etc.)

f) If reality is both sufficiently ordered and challenging enough the dialogue leads to greater perspectivity. There must be sufficient order so that the child does not get entangled in the chaos of opposing meanings, but on the other hand there must be sufficient challenge to appeal to the child.

g) The child's existence also shows the tension between being in need of help and independence.

h) Although the educators form part of reality, there are also by the side of the child to facilitate his dialogue.

i) By means of education the child's need for help decreases while his independence increases.

4.3 Education reveals a linear dynamic movement (Ter Horst, 1973)

If everything is intact, if the child is in an authentic way in full dialogue with reality, if he is given the necessary aid by his educators, if he fulfils the expectations set by his educators, he is en route to adulthood. In this case his education shows a linear dynamic movement, the situation projects towards the future and there is a clear future perspective for both educator and educand. The interrelated factors promote the becoming of the child and can be indicated as follows:

Factor A) Becoming of child
Factor B) ——————————————→ Adulthood
Factor C) Future perspective

5. THE PROBLEMATIC EDUCATIONAL SITUATION

Positive outcomes of educational acts can never be guaranteed. Education is part of man's everyday activities and because 'to err is human' things often go awry in his field of human endeavour (Pretorius, 1976: 35; Kotzé, 1978: 80). Various factors may cause aggravating conditions which may hamper the dialogical and linear character of education to such an extent that the educational situation acquires a problematic character. Various educationally impeding factors as well as educational errors may influence the normal flow of educational acts to such an extent, that either the educator or the educand or both may participate insufficiently, so much so that education itself more or less comes to a standstill.

This results in a problematic educational situation, experienced by those concerned as lacking prospects, meaningless, hopeless or even threatening. This situation may acquire such a character that it cannot be changed to provide prospects or to be meaningful again withiout aid or assistance from elsewhere (Kotzé, 1978: 80).

5.1 Prospectless behaviour

The educand can expose his lack of prospects as indolence, depression, fear, aggression, destruction, isolation, lack of awareness of reality, repudiation of tasks, psycho-somatic problems, etc. while the educator's conduct may be depression, overprotection, strictness, rage, isolation, neglect, rejection, desertion, liassez-faire, etc. (Ter Horst, 1973: 22).

5.2 Problematic education reveals a circular dynamic movement

Despite the fact that the education and the becoming of the child now come to a relative standstill, the problematic educational situation can still be characterized as dynamic, although the relevant factors within this situation are directed towards one another in a prospectless way. The dynamic character of the educational situation now degenerates from a linear to a circular one. The education and becoming of the child are impeded by a vicious cycle which is relatively impenetrable by new factors.

Arnold (Arnold, 1978: 59) mentions that vicious cycles are amongst the most common problems encountered in guidance. Sometimes a vicious cycle is a fairly simple and straightforward one, e.g.: An angry parent punishes a child who rebels against this punishment by further misbehaviour, which elicits more frequent and more severe punishment from the determined parent, thereby eliciting more rebellion and acting out from the child, with an escalating battle of wills.

Often, though, the vicious cycle is very complex, with subsystems extending to different geographical and social situations, such as the school.

Especially a child with some or other handicap is in need of special educational assistance from parents, but according to Thomas (1982: 136) few parents with a disabled or handicapped child can meet the child's needs without help from outside the family.

6. EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE

From this problematic educational situation the educator turns to somebody for help. This is done implicitly or explicitly. Eleanor Reid (1971: 53-54) is of the opinion that if a handicapped child's parents say, 'This is too much to ask of me', or 'But I have my own life to lead', or 'It's a lost cause', they mean that the burden of their handicapped child is becoming too heavy and that they are asking, however indirectly, for help.

As a requester of help or assistance the educator puts an educational question to the helper and expects an educational answer (Van der Geld, 1973: 195). To the parent the child is not primarily ill, crippled, deaf, blind, brain injured, malajusted, etc., but child, personality-in-the-making who has the right to be educated in whatever way it may be (Ter Horst, 1972: 117). The question that comes to the fore is, "How must we proceed with this child?" This is a question which clearly supposes en educational answer, and thus not only are expectations cherished, but demands are made on whoever is available as assistance-giver. He must render assistance that is helpful, therefore it must be education assistance (Kotzé, 1987: 77).

The assistance-giver thus becomes involved in the problematic educational situation as a professional, but on a temporary basis. he is temporary in that he must withdraw after a longer or shorter period or advice, guidance and re-education (Ter Horst, 1973: 25; Arnold, 1978: 12; McDonald, 1971: 54). He is professional in that he possesses scientific pedagogical knowledge and skill which enable him to gain insight into the problematic education situation and thereafter, with the parents and the child, bring about new certainties (Langeveld, 1974: 15).

7. EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE TO PARENTS OF DISABLED CHILDREN

7.1 Introduction

Today we are increasingly aware that educational concern with the child with disabilities is not solely the task of the school or of the various specialists in this field (Van Tricht and Oldambt, 1961: 8). It is recognized more and more how much parents, as the primary educators of their children, influence the overall becoming of the child. Therefore parents need to know to what degree work with the child will stand or fall on their educational involvement with their child (Adams, 1978: 211). However, if they are to optimize their educational potential these parents will need professional education assistance.

7.2 The educational assistance-giver

The assistance giver stands before the task of helping to correct the problematic educational situation. This means that he must make an effort to change or to eliminate as far as possible the complex, inter-dependent factors which cause the problematic educational situation and impeding the proper becoming of the child. In other words he must look for openings for changing or for breaking the circular dynamic movement in order to get the total educational dialogue going again.

To succeed, he must possess professional knowledge of both the theory and practice of education in general, and, in particular, of the essence of problematic educational situations caused by disabilities. That is, he must possess knowledge and skills concerning the factors which impede and which promote education.

7.3 Educational assistance to parents of disabled children

What follows are general principles and forms of aid rather than specific strategies. The specific form of educational help will vary from case to case depending on the specific situations of those concerned.

7.3.1 Communication of diagnostic results and accompanying advice to parents

The manner in which the parents are told that their child is disabled, can evoke the most intensely negative responses and feelings from parents (Janssens, 1977: 27). Many parents indicate that their contact with professional people was disappointing or even unsatisfactory because the communication of the discovery of the disability was handled badly.

Parents do not only expect formal and factual information, but because of the seriousness of their problem, they also expect a more empathetic and even a more sympathetic attitude (Janssens, 1977: 28).

Obscure or incomplete information, or information that is unintelligibly conveyed - often so typical in the communication of technical information to lay persons - also leads to negative reactions (Janssens, 1977: 28).

Exactly how the outcome of the diagnosis ought to be conveyed to the parents is difficult to indicate because of the variety of situations. However, what is told to the parents should be put simply, directly and honestly. Honesty by the professional seems to be one of the top characteristics that leads to successful helping (Seligman, 1979: 78).

The diagnosis must be phrased in a manner which parents will understand and must include a statement of what is known as well as of what is not known.

It seems that parents are in need of more information than only that concerning the nature of the handicap and accompanying advice. Six themes on which parents would like information are mentioned by different researchers, according to Janssens (1977: 29-30).

- In the first place they want to know what caused the child's disability.
- Secondly, by discovering the etiology of the disability, they hope to find a way to cure it and prevent its occurrence in any future children they may have. So in reality they want to know what the possibility would be in future of having other disabled children.
- A third theme concerns the care for the future of the child.
- Fourthly parents want to know how to bring up their child as they feel an uncertainty concerning the way in which they should be educating him.
- In the fifth instance parents want to know how to react to remarks of friends, acquaintances, neighbours and other children about the child's handicap.
- Lastly parents seek advice on how to come to terms with the problem of having a disabled child.

A single diagnostic talk seems to be insufficient to inform that parents fully. As a matter of fact a series of interviews and diagnostic talks may be necessary to answer the many questions.

7.3.2 Redefining the problem for the parents

According to Arnold (1978: 9-10) parents who come for help usually do so because they have a defined problem with which they feel unable to deal. Part of the educationist's task is to redefine the problem in such terms that parents can feel less helpless and live better with it or that enhances compatibility with their child as a result.

As has been stated previously some parents reveal negative behaviour patterns because of feelings of guilt, helplessness or hopelessness about the child's problem. They will be relieved to learn that they are not being blamed for the child's condition, that they do not need to blame themselves, and can in fact do something to help the child. They can have their hopes for the child rekindled if the problem is redefined for them (Arnold, 1978: 194).

Simple but acceptable explanations should help lay a foundation of optimistic expectation of improvement. Such expectation constitutes an important part in modifying the circular dynamic movement. The vicious cycle can be disrupted, initiating a healthy one: change the expectation of misbehaviour to expectation of improved behaviour, change parents' frustration and dispair into hopeful persistence, change the parents' anger and rejection into acceptance of the challenge of helping the child, and figure out a way for the child to gain the adults' attention without misbehaving (Arnold, 1978: 196).

Thus by providing parents with the tools and techniques to gain control of the situation, the parent is helped to take up the education of their child anew.

7.3.3 Explaining the child's problematic situatedness to the parents

As was previously indicated the overall behaviour of the disabled child is rather difficult to understand by parents who in most cases are laymen in this field. This behaviour therefore calls for a detailed explanation in simple terms, to the parents.

Instead of looking for someone to perform a miracle or to tell them the optimistic things they naturally want to hear, they should have a detailed study made of their child under the guidance of the educationist who should also coordinate the work of other specialists and then integrate or reinterpret all the findings for the better understanding of the child's educational problems.

The educationist should also inform and explain the patterns of a child's becoming to the parents. Unfortunately parents are almost always amateur educationists and they usually do not realize that they must also learn how to direct and aid the becoming of their children. Learning what factors are important for the affective, intellectual and moral becoming of a child, will not only make child rearing a more pleasant and challenging experience, but will also help prevent the development of many educational problems. Knowledge of the patterns of a child's becoming will also furnish the parents with a frame of reference within which to evaluate and understand their own child's behaviour and also their own conduct (McDonald, 1971: 49-50).

Furthermore, parents should become familiar with the broader aspects of the specific disability. Knowing something about the number of other children in the country who are similarly handicapped, the facilities available to comply with the special needs for these children, and so on, will help parents to see their problems in a better perspective. Many parents have reported feeling better able to carry out their educational obligations when they realized that they were not alone but that many other parents were facing the same difficulties. The awareness that the educationist has been studying these problems and has accumulated the scientific knowledge and skills which can be applied to aid the child, is in itself encouraging (McDonald, 1971: 50).

7.3.4 **Engagement of parents in co-ordinated educational edeavours**

Few would argue that parental involvement in formal education is not important, if not crucial. Buscaglia (Seligman, 1979: 2) believes that a gold mine remains untapped when teachers of exceptional children fail to work with parents. He says,

'Teachers ... who do not use parents as at least one-third of the learning team are utilizing only two-thirds of their potential affectiveness.'

Reynolds and Birch (Seligman, 1979: 5) note that there is increasing evidence that a child's educational progress is accelerated when teachers and parents work in close partnership.

In order to get parents involved in the more formal education various parent-teacher meetings are necessary. During these conferences the educational programme, also that which is to be carried out in the home, can be constructed. Later conferences can be scheduled to discuss the child's progress and how to continue the help at home (Seligman, 1979: 5). However, teachers should maintain a continuous awareness that in their sincere desire to motivate parents to help their child, they may make impossible demands, which can cause discouragement and despair and lead to 'parental paralysis' (Seligman, 1979: 33).

8. CONCLUSION

Every parent is at times uncertain, even perplexed because the disabled child creates particular uneasiness and poses a threat to parents' sense of adequacy. The child's needs are diverse and pressing and parents are often educationally at a loss. However, with the appropriate educational aid parents need not be confused, bewildered and hopeless, but on the contrary will be enabled to take positive and constructive action to educate their child in a proper way and so to improve his quality of life.

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